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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PHNOM PENH 000003

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [CB](#)

SUBJECT: CAMBODIA'S VULNERABLE MUSLIM MINORITY: EMBASSY
EFFORTS TO BRIDGE THE GAPS

REF: A. PHNOM PENH 170 (CAMBODIA'S HIGHEST MUSLIM LEADER
DISCUSSES CHALLENGES)

[B](#). 08 PHNOM PENH 968 (WHATEVER HAPPENED TO UMM
AL-QURA)

[C](#). 07 PHNOM PENH 1363 (THE "FUNDAMENTALIZING" OF
CAMBODIA'S MUSLIM MINORITY)

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES THEODORE ALLEGRA FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: Cambodia is home to approximately 400,000 Muslims, known as the Cham, who are viewed as generally well integrated into society by the Cambodian government and by the Cham themselves. Cambodia's Cham live in extreme poverty and have low education levels, high illiteracy rates, and poor health indicators. Cambodia also has porous borders, rampant corruption, easy access to forged documents and black-market weapons, and weak rule of law. All of these factors work together to make Cambodia an attractive haven for criminals and extremists, and make the Cham, especially the unemployed youth, susceptible to the potential of radicalization and violent extremism. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has in recent years increased its capacity in counterterrorism with U.S. support and believes it has a relatively strong handle on individuals and groups connected with terrorism. However, gaps still exist in the RGC's ability to identify and counter unpredictable yet urgent threats. The Embassy employs a "persistent presence" approach and actively engages the Cham community as a whole. Examples of such positive engagement include Ramadan celebrations, sports diplomacy, education and exchange programs, emergency relief, medical clinics, and general outreach. END SUMMARY.

THREATS

[2](#). (C) Branches or affiliates of NGOs suspected of extremist support such as the Revival for Islamic Heritage (RIHS) and the World Assembly for Muslim Youth (WAMY) are known to be active in Cambodia. Tales of infighting, corruption and ineptness have reportedly led to little progress in the way of radicalization. However, Cambodia's known deep vulnerabilities, culture of corruption and limited ability to govern and maintain law and order make it susceptible to external influences that are using NGOs and massive donations as the vessel to disseminate their message to the Cham. This at-risk segment of the population is accepting help with essential services, educational aid and mosque construction from NGOs who have direct ties to tier 1 and tier 2 Terrorist Support Entities from the Middle East. Although this

emergent threat is not linear and progressive, it is and will continue to reflect the very real efforts to perpetuate a safehaven in Cambodia in which a vulnerable and welcoming Muslim population remains susceptible to money, ideology, and influence from beyond its borders.

13. (C) Many of the threats such as endemic corruption, porous borders, lack of capacity to counter terrorism, and weak rule of law pertain not only to Cambodia, but also to other countries in the region. And although current U.S. counterterrorism policy and strategy appropriately focuses on other countries in the region for specific tasks, the desired effects of U.S. strategy are relevant to the entire region, including Cambodia. For that reason, an updated strategy would benefit from widening the scope of effects to include an emphasis on the broader region for improvement of maritime cooperation, connectivity, and interoperability, as well as for coordination of economic aid, security assistance, information operations, and capacity building to reduce safehavens.

RGC STEPS UP

14. (SBU) The RGC has long recognized that Bali bombing mastermind Hambali's safehaven in Cambodia provided a wakeup call to get serious about counterterrorism (Ref B). Hambali's stay at a Muslim school in Cambodia in 2002-2003, and subsequent arrest, forced Cambodian officials to become more involved in monitoring the Cham community and outside influences. The RGC has also worked to better incorporate

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the Cham into society by allowing traditional clothing in schools, building a prayer room at the airport, and appointing dozens of Cham to high-level government positions.

According to the Cambodian Muslim Student Association president Sos Mousine, many more Cham are attending colleges or universities in the country than before, and almost one-third of those attending are female. He considers this to be a direct result of recent government actions directed at Cham integration.

15. (SBU) A late 2008 study conducted by the American Institutes for Research on the marginalization of Cham Muslim communities found that Cham have been assimilating into mainstream society in various ways. It also found that "feelings of exclusion, if and when they exist among Cham communities in Cambodia today, are much more subtle and difficult to detect." According to the study, evidence did not point to "feelings of alienation or extremism among the Cham communities interviewed." A March 2009 interagency conflict assessment also found "no significant evidence of serious or widespread tensions" between the Cham and Khmer, and determined that the Cham see religion as "a source of discipline, not radicalization." Most recently, an August 2009 survey conducted by the International Republican Institute found that the majority of the Cham feel they have become more involved in Cambodian society over the past ten years. Only 2% felt they get along poorly with the Buddhist community, however 23% of Buddhists felt they have a poor relationship with the Cham community. Finally, 83% of the Cham sample had a favorable opinion of the United States, compared with 89% of the general sample.

16. (SBU) The above findings are in contrast to earlier research on Cham religious schools conducted by Bjorn Blenglsli. Blenglsli's research emphasized the "possibility for violent jihad interpretations in Cambodia where fundamentalist strains of Islam are gaining ground." Blenglsli determined that "Islam in Cambodia is changing," and that "skepticism towards the West is increasing and many Muslims are aware of and oppose the USA." The Mufti recently dismissed such radicalization of the Cham as "old news." (Ref A). When a potential drama series (detailed below) was

discussed with Cham leaders, they agreed to the general idea but were adamant that they would not support any portrayal of radicalism in Cambodia. Their main argument was that since Hambali, there has been "no sign of extremism in Cambodia," and that this has been due to the "efforts of the RGC working in harmony with Cham leaders to prevent any sort of radical foothold."

EMBASSY STEPS IN

17. (C) RGC officials believe they have done a good job at keeping radicals and money with questionable ties out of Cambodia in the last few years. While soft approaches to combating the influence of violent extremist elements within the Cham community remains the priority effort within the U.S. Mission in Phnom Penh, the country team recognizes that the Cambodian Government lacks the capability to respond to terrorist incidents across the full spectrum. With strong commitment by the Cambodian government, the United States supported the creation of a National Counter-Terrorism Committee (NCTC). This interagency body, under the direct authority of the Prime Minister, is responsible for coordinating the country's security elements and intelligence apparatus to counter any direct threat posed by violent extremist organizations and their supporting elements.

18. (C) Through regular U.S. Special Operations Forces (USSOF) Joint Combined Exchanges for Training (JCETs) and persistent engagement by USSOF personnel from the Pacific Command Augmentation Team, the Embassy is slowly beginning to build tactical and technical capacity within a select joint unit comprised of Cambodian Military and Military Police operating under the NCTC. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has also conducted training and exchanges in forensic post-blast investigations, and several members of Cambodia's law enforcement community have received U.S. Treasury training on CT Financing or attended CT-related training at ILEA in Bangkok. The Embassy is also currently undertaking a maritime security capacity building project in

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an effort to close porous maritime borders to potential transit by Terrorist Support Entities through the creation of a central coordination authority for maritime security within the government and associated operational capacity building within the Cambodian Navy and National Police maritime units.

19. (U) In addition to general outreach into Cham communities which include school visits, mosque openings, micro-scholarships, and exchanges, the Embassy added to the success of last year's outreach into provincial Cambodia by again holding a Ramadan event outside of Phnom Penh. The Embassy worked closely with the deputy Imam of Kampong Cham province to ensure we reached the widest possible audience, which included imams, community leaders, religious teachers, and especially students from four of the poorest Cham districts. The President's Ramadan address was dubbed into Khmer and shown to guests prior to serving a halal meal. All eyes were glued to the screen, and many of the participants actively discussed the President's message during the meal. One student from Kampong Cham declared "The U.S. President is black, and I've been invited to share a meal with a female U.S. Ambassador. This is like heaven." Zakarya Adam, a Parliamentarian and deputy Mufti, stated that the Iftar "offers us friendship and deepens the relationship among our peoples regardless of our religious beliefs." The Embassy provided each guest with a translated copy of the latest version of "Being Muslim in America" as well as the 2010 Richness and Diversity calendar. Both events received positive press, and imams from various communities have requested we visit them next year.

10. (SBU) The Embassy continues to utilize the Ambassador's Fund for Counterterrorism to further engage with the Muslim

minority. The "Islam for Law Enforcement" seminars conducted in April have been followed by an Islamic Law and Human Rights seminar and circus performances in Cham communities which incorporate the messages of trust, tolerance and integration presented in prior seminars. Moreover, a sports diplomacy project which incorporates messages of community and tolerance is planned to begin in January.

¶11. (SBU) The Department of Defense's (DoD) Civil Affairs team works closely with both State and USAID when planning and implementing humanitarian projects. Medcaps, Dentcaps, and civil engineering construction visits all target both Cham and Khmer villages with noticeable and immediate results evidenced by the smiling faces and camaraderie shown by the villagers. Further DoD funding has been used for infrastructure development, to include playgrounds and sports facilities, in schools in some of the poorest and most conservative of Cham communities. Additionally, a television drama series is being developed which will incorporate social issues confronting Cham and Khmer alike with a focus on tolerance, friendship, and inclusion.

¶12. (U) Most recently the Embassy was able to quickly mobilize and respond to an emergency in the Cham community by providing over 80 boxes of clothing and mosquito nets for approximately 2000 individuals affected by a fire which leveled hundreds of homes. The Mufti stated the U.S. Embassy was the first to respond to the humanitarian needs of the community. The goodwill this one action created cannot be overstated.

¶13. (C) COMMENT: Although certain Muslim areas in Cambodia can certainly be termed conservative or even Salafist, the radicalization of the small Cham population does not seem to have materialized as quickly or to the extent feared by experts even as little as two years ago. Embassy officials have found villages previously reported to be closed to foreigners open to engagement, especially if that engagement includes assistance with health and education. While large gaps remain in the RGC's ability to investigate and respond to immediate terrorist threats, it would appear that the RGC's few but important efforts to integrate the Cham, coupled with U.S. humanitarian and outreach activities, have succeeded in increasing understanding and goodwill. Continued monitoring, engagement, and resources directed toward such preventative programs will be key to addressing gaps and ensuring this trend continues. END COMMENT.
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